

**HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION**  
**OCTOBER 24, 2016**  
**APPLICATION FOR A CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS**  
**C14H-1983-0007**  
**Townsend-Thomson Building**  
**718 Congress Avenue**

**PROPOSAL**

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Install a neon-lit blade sign on the front of the building.

**PROJECT SPECIFICATIONS**

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The applicant proposes the erection of a 35-square foot blade sign on the front of the building. The sign will be 14 feet tall, 2.5 feet wide, and have a depth of 1.6 feet. It will be constructed of painted aluminum clad with bull nose and have neon letters.

**STANDARDS FOR REVIEW**

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The Commission's Standards for Review for signs at historic landmarks include:

**B. PROJECTING SIGNS**

**LOCATION**

- A projecting sign should be located near the business entrance, just above the door or to the side of it, near eye level. The bottom of the projecting sign, however, shall be a minimum of 9 feet above the sidewalk.

**SIZE**

- The maximum size of an individual projecting sign (one face) shall be 6 square feet. It may not extend from the building façade for a greater distance than 6 feet or a distance equal to 2/3 the width of the abutting sidewalk, whichever distance is less.

**NUMBER OF SIGNS**

- In general, only one projecting sign per building façade is allowed. However, where the Commission determines that the result would be compatible with the District, one projecting sign shall be allowed for each distinct facade module of a building.

**II. SIGN MATERIALS**

- Use materials that are compatible with the materials of the building façade.
- Painted wood and metal are appropriate materials for signs. Do not use unfinished materials, including unpainted wood.
- Use plastic only in limited amounts. Plastic may not be the predominant materials on any sign.
- Do not use highly reflective materials.

**IV. SIGN LIGHTING**

- Use an external, shielded lamp to direct light at the sign.

**DO NOT USE:**

1. Internal illumination
2. Fluorescent lights
3. Sodium vapor lights.

**NEON**

- Exposed neon lighting is strongly discouraged, but may be permitted where the Commission determines it is appropriate to the context of the building and does not impede interpretation of the historic character of the building. Neon may be used to highlight reverse-channel lettering on a sign to create a "halo" effect.

- Applications for signs with exposed neon lighting must show through photographic documentation that the building had a sign with exposed neon in the historic period.

### **INAPPROPRIATE SIGN TYPES**

- Signs that are out of character with those seen historically, and that would alter the historic character of the street.
- Free-standing signs, either pole-mounted or monument types.
- Animated signs.
- Sandwich (or menu) boards that stand on the sidewalk are generally discouraged.
- Any sign that visually overpowers the building or obscures significant architectural features.
- Roof signs.

## **VI. GENERAL DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS**

- Consider the building front as part of an overall sign program. Coordinate signage with the composition of the façade, including ornamental details. Signs should always appear to be in scale with the elements of the façade.
- Signs should be in proportion to the building and must not dominate the façade.
- Develop a master sign plan for the entire building front and coordinate signage for different businesses within the same building.
- Locate a sign on a building to emphasize design elements of the façade. In no case should a sign obscure architectural details or features.
- Mount signs to fit within existing architectural features. Signs should help reinforce the horizontal lines of moldings and transoms seen along the street.
- The total area of all sign faces on a façade module may not exceed 20 square feet.

### **COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Not reviewed.

### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

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The applicant is basing this request upon the precedent for a large neon sign at this location for Franklin's, a women's clothing store that operated in the 1930s and 1940s at this location on Congress Avenue, and was erected at a time when many businesses on Congress Avenue had large neon-lit blade signs. The Townsend-Thomson Building dates from 1875, and had a slipcover on it at the time that the building housed Franklin's.

Staff is not comfortable with recommending approval of this sign, as it is much larger than the Commission's sign standards allow, and has exposed neon, which is also discouraged in the Commission's sign standards. Staff is also concerned about setting a precedent for large neon-lit blade signs on Congress Avenue and on 6<sup>th</sup> Street, where many businesses in the heyday of neon had large neon signs advertising their business – setting this precedent could “open the floodgates” for many more large, neon-lit blade signs on Congress Avenue, affecting the historic character of the district. However, the sign standards do create an exception for recreating a historic-age sign so long as it does not “impede the interpretation of the historic character of the building.” That will be a determination that the Commission will have to make in this case.

Staff recommends reducing the size of the sign, and switching the neon lighting for halo-lit lighting instead, in greater conformance with the Commission's sign standards.